A large proportion of the people living in the lowland areas of Ethiopia are pastoralists engaged in extensive livestock herding and cultivation of a few crops. Beyond their direct role in generating food and income, livestock is an asset, serving as a store of wealth, collateral for credit, and an essential safety net during times of crisis. Raising livestock also permits pastoral communities to benefit from the land’s low productivity efficiently. Livestock deaths or loss of productivity can, therefore, push families into a ‘poverty trap’ from which it is difficult to escape.

Historically, pastoralism in Ethiopia has always adapted to the arid or semi-arid environment and operates effectively in low and highly variable rainfall conditions. However, the climate is becoming more variable and less predictable and has become a defining feature of lowland vulnerability. In 2019, the February – May Belg rainfall was poor in some areas and failed altogether in others. This condition followed years of poor and erratic rainfall and threatened to spark a humanitarian emergency.

The circumstances resulted in deteriorating animal body conditions, increased disease outbreaks, poor livestock market value, livestock death, and reduced milk yields.

To mitigate the effects of the drought on pastoralists and reduce the need for major emergency response, FAO launched Early Action interventions targeting 151 000 households (755 000 people) in the worst-hit areas of Afar, Oromia, Somali and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People’s (SNNP) regional states.

The response was particularly relevant, before communities reached the peak of vulnerability and has helped the affected population keep their animals healthy, reproducing, and producing milk.
Supplementary animal feed improves livestock productivity

As the sun rises, so do Madin Hassan’s four grandchildren, all under 12. They sit around her on a mat in their small courtyard to have breakfast before they go to school. She serves milk tea and bread.

“We have milk again,” she says, with a beaming smile.

The milk from her goats is a key source of food and nutrients for her grandchildren and herself.

However, the goats grew weaker and produced less milk as this year’s drought raged on. Eventually, Madin stopped milking them.

Without a stable income, Madin was forced to reduce her family’s daily meals from three to two.

Her village, Kebtinak, like the rest of the Somali region of Ethiopia, is experiencing drought that has left riverbeds dry and driven many pastoralists away in search of pasture and water. The remaining vegetation is withered and brown. Madin says her village received rains for only two weeks during the first season, as opposed to the expected three months.

Drought is not new to Madin. She says in the past, there was a drought every three years, and pastoralists always moved their herds to find water and fresh pasture. However, the situation has changed. In the last five years, drought has become more frequent and intense, leaving pastoralists struggling to cope.

Madin’s and other vulnerable households received 600kg of Total Mixed Ratio (TMR) - supplementary livestock feed. The ration is enough to feed two core breeding and milking cows or 14 shoats (goats and sheep) for three months.
Feed is nutrient-balanced and contains forages, grains, protein feeds, minerals, and vitamins. It is prepared by using agriculture wastes, crop residues, dry grasses, and by-products like oilseed cakes, brans, and molasses. Besides improving the overall physical body conditions, TMR enhances milk production and reproductive capacity of the livestock.

The beneficiaries noticed that the livestock became stronger after consuming TMR.

Habsa Sahan said her two cows started gaining weight after two weeks of consuming TMR.

“My cows were very weak and could hardly walk to the well. Their bones were sticking out from underneath their skins. Now they are putting on some weight,” said Sahan.

In areas where farmers still had access to fodder and roughage, FAO provided 12 Multi-Nutrient Blocks to each household. The lick blocks are formulated to provide energy, nitrogen, and essential vitamins and minerals to enable animals to survive until pasture conditions improve. They also enhance the digestion of low-quality forages, thereby increase the body weight of the animals.

Bisharo Hassan’s cows lick the blocks every morning and evening.

“My cows became stronger when they started licking the blocks,” she said.

Stronger and healthier livestock like Hassan and Sahan’s can also fetch better prices from the market.

Dahir Farah, the Head of Livestock Development in Lasdhenkeyre Woreda (district) said the prices of livestock had dropped due to their poor physical condition and health – resulting in less income for households and the community.

“Some farmers were selling their livestock at half the market price while others failed to sell. With the supplementary feeding, the livestock will fetch higher prices,” he said.
Treatment sets livestock on the path to recovery

As early as 5:30 am, the veterinary and animal health experts arrive at Kunka Kebele administrative offices in Gode Woreda and set up a makeshift livestock treatment station in the adjacent field. The pastoralists arrive from all directions, each guiding their herd, including sheep, goats, and cattle.

Each animal is examined, and temperature reading is taken to establish its health status before it is treated. The treatment includes the administration of medicines that kill internal and external parasites, antibiotics to fight infections, deworming medications, and basic care for injuries and wounds.

This simple treatment helps prevent and contain the spread of diseases and boosts the animals’ immunity to withstand the harsh weather conditions and any other shocks.

Veterinary staff from government and the Regional Livestock Resource and Pastoralist Development Bureaus are at the frontline of undertaking this massive campaign that FAO rolled out in August 2019 in Afar, Somali, and Oromia, and SNNP Regions. They are assisted in some Woredas (districts) by NGOs that partnered with FAO to support the implementation of the activities.

Livestock diseases have always been a major challenge in the pastoralism production systems of Ethiopia. Endemic diseases include Peste des Petits Ruminants (PPR), anthrax, lumpy skin disease, blackleg, camel pox, parasites, sheep and goat pox, and tick-borne diseases.

However, parasites and infectious diseases are amplified in drought conditions because of increased transmission in crowded water and feed sources, compounded by lowered immunity of the livestock due to poor nutrition. Access to veterinary services in the targeted regions is also limited due to the nomadic lifestyle of pastoralists. Also, because of the intensity of the drought, most livestock owners do not have the financial resources to pay for treatment.

Without this free vital veterinary support from FAO, many pastoralists would lose their livestock.

Bisharo Hassan, a livestock owner from Danan Woreda (district), is relieved that his two goats were examined and treated. “They were very weak. I was told that they had an infection. I am happy that they were treated before the situation got worse,” he said.

Aamina, 45, also from Danan Woreda, was pleased with the treatment because she lost 13 goats already. They were found with internal parasites. “I cannot imagine losing another,” she said.

Aamina is left with six goats that are her lifeline. “These goats are my everything,” she speaks fondly, as she leads them away.
Officials from Shabelle zonal office in the Somali Region and Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) hailed FAO for the timely delivery of Early Action support to drought-affected pastoral and agro-pastoral communities, saying the intervention averted a crisis.

Speaking in a meeting in Gode on 02 October 2019, Ms. Maria Bernardez, the Food Assistance Expert, ECHO Regional Office, said the project proves that investing early before the situation worsens has an impact on the lives and livelihood of the population.

On his part, Mr. Yohannes Regassa, the Programme Officer, ECHO Ethiopia, hailed the collaboration between FAO, NGO partners, and the government.

“We are pleased that the government is working with FAO and other partners. We think this project has been successful in reaching the beneficiaries on time because of this partnership,” he said.

Mr. Jacopo Damelio, FAO Ethiopia’s Programme Officer said the Early Action programme was a unique undertaking for FAO Ethiopia. “The response helped to prevent starvation of livestock and speed their return to productivity and good health,” he said.

Abdurahim Abdulahi, the Party Head of the Zonal Somali Democratic Party office appreciated the livestock feed and treatment services and requested for more support.

“Because of the increased frequency and intensity of the drought, we need to scale up the interventions and reach more people,” he said.

Mr. Damelio informed the meeting that the Early Action programme would build on ongoing long-term resilience programmes that FAO is implementing in the Somali Region. They include training and equipping Community Animal Health Workers (CAHW) and supporting pastoral and agro-pastoral communities to produce fodder.
FAO Ethiopia collaborated with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), through Letters of Agreement, to implement the “Emergency Livestock Response to Drought Affected Pastoral and Agro-Pastoral Communities in Ethiopia,” project. The Organizations are Aged and Children Pastoralists Association (ACPA), Islamic Relief, Lutheran World Foundation (LWF), Save the Children, Organization for Welfare and Development in Action, and Wako Gutu Foundation.

The NGOs played a crucial role in mobilizing and sensitizing communities, registering and verifying beneficiaries, and facilitating the treatment of animals and the distribution of feed. They also trained extension agents and beneficiaries on feeding regimes and animal health management. Save the Children is supporting the implementation of the unconditional cash transfer component to beneficiaries.

All the NGOs are implementing pre-existing programmes in their respective areas of intervention and have detailed knowledge of local contexts. This has enabled faster implementation of the project activities and may facilitate sustainability and the transition of some activities into subsequent programmes implemented by the NGOs. The partnerships also helped to avert duplication of efforts.

Jacopo Damelio, FAO Ethiopia’s Program Officer, said the lessons from this partnership would be crucial as FAO is strengthening collaboration with NGOs and other partners in the country.

NGO partners enhance the implementation of the emergency livestock interventions
This publication has been produced with the assistance of the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (UNCERF) and the European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO). The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of FAO and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the UNCERF and ECHO.